

No. Brunswick celebrates Disabilities Awareness Day

BY KATHY CHANG Staff Writer

NORTH BRUNSWICK — It was 10 years ago when Danielle's Law was signed into law.

Diane Gruskowski, Danielle's mom, reflected on her daughter and the law that honors her during the fifth annual Disabilities Awareness Day, held April 7 at North Brunswick Township High School.

The day was hosted by the North Brunswick Abilities Council, led by Danielle's aunt, Robin Turner, and offered information and resources for residents with physical, emotional, mental and developmental disabilities, along with their families and caregivers.

The purpose was to provide a day of education, relaxation and socialization.

"My daughter has accomplished so much and continues to save lives," Gruskowski said.

Danielle passed away in 2002 after caretakers at her Edison group home failed to identify symptoms of her Rett syndrome as life-threatening and did not call 911.

Less than a year later, on Oct. 26, 2003, Danielle's Law was signed by then-Gov. James E. McGreevey in Carteret. The law requires staff members working directly with people with developmental disabilities or traumatic brain injury to call 911 in life-threatening emergencies.

Gruskowski said her family, including her mother, Mary Rindosh, continues to attend events like the one held in North Brunswick because of the continued visibility that people with disabilities need to get.

"They can't speak for themselves," she said. "It's been 10 years, and we have made bigger strides. ... Danielle has saved so many lives."

According to statistics provided by the Unusual Incident Reporting & Management System, under the state Department of Human Services, there have been 64,572 instances where 911 was called in New Jersey since Jan. 1, 2005.

There were 607 alleged violations of Danielle's Law, of which 101 were substantiated. There were no repeat offenders of the law.

North Brunswick Mayor Francis "Mac" Womack, Township Council members, and state Assemblymen Upendra Chivukula and Joseph Cryan were on hand for the day.

"This is a proud thing for the township, and without the community, the day would not be possible," Womack said.

Mark Cafferty, director of the township Office of Emergency Management, displayed information and discussed the township's registry, which provides emergency personnel with important information for when an emergency happens.

Turner said Abilities Council members saw a registry made in Woodbridge Township, and thought it was a good idea to create one in North Brunswick. Cafferty said there is now a statewide system in place as well.

"The [registry] sends us a flag of whether a resident is disabled or is on oxygen [at any given household]," Cafferty said, adding that the town is continuously urging residents to provide information for the registry.

Residents can call emergency management at 732-347-0922, ext. 388.

Members of the North Brunswick American Legion Post 459 — including Paul Carroll, Wayne Pearce and Richard Pender — said they were there to show their support for those in need.

"Many of our members are disabled and living at the Menlo Park Veterans Home [in Edison]," said Carroll, who spent 20 years serving in the U.S. Army, with stints in Desert Storm, Europe and Asia.

Pender, who served in the Army from 1952 to 1956 during the Korean War, said this is just one of the many events the Legion participates in throughout the community.

Frank Quadrino, of the Veterans Affairs New Jersey Health Care System, said his organization was there to provide information to veterans about the many benefits that they offer.

"Back in the old days, they would come to us," he said. "Now, every chance we get, we are reaching out to them. Many don't know what benefits they are entitled to. They certainly have earned it."

Antoinette Johnson, communications manager at the School of Public Health at the University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey, provided information for those families in need of community placement as part of the Community Living Education Project.

Girl Scouts Tamera Hutchinson, Ally Kurlander, Anaysha Robinson, Ashley Garcia, sisters Lindsey, Emily and Marissa Mykietyn, Cassie Maisonet and Elizabeth Ruffe provided face-painting during the event.

Girl Scout leaders Mary Hutchinson, Maryann Mykietyn and Kathy Ruffe said this experience helps the girls open their eyes and exposes them to those in need.

"The Girl Scouts are all about helping people," Maryann Mykietyn said.